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Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

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To the memory of M.W.

Confessions of a Jewish Woman

Since I had to close my millinery shop on the main square of our town I have been condemned to idleness with the rest of the inhabitants of the Ghetto. Idleness is a state of existence alien to me, except for the few illnesses in my life. I have resorted therefore again to writing, one of the favorite companions of my solitude, and have decided to review my life of 48 years, for this may be my last opportunity before it ends. It surprises me actually how coolly I contemplate this last possibility. I don't seem to be shedding too many tears about the the likely prospect of my beforestanding demise even though I have liked to live, even during the hardships and difficulties of my life.

Writing has always been the friend with the help of which I have been able to elevate myself above the distressing humdrum of my daily life to a sphere of clarity and even some happiness and serenity. And when did I need you more my trusted friend and guardian angel, than now when everything has gone topsy-turvy, the world has gone totally crazy around me! The town officials among my acquaintances say that the Nazis only plan to take us to forced labor in Germany for the duration of the war, but this explanation makes little sense to me. For if so, why would they take all of us, with the old, the sick and the children? I try hard not to think about the information my brother H. from the capital gave me, because it would only threaten my remaining precious sanity. He says he has it from refugees from Slovakia and Poland, whom he occasionally harbors in his house at great risk to his family, that the Germans murder all those Jews they can't use for labor. He advised me therefore try

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to escape to the capital by false papers or any other means. Doesn't he know that his advise only increased my agony? He only added the agony of the conflict to the anticipation of torture and death. I haven't been able to make up my mind leaving this community in this hour, especially not with the help of my Hungarian friends. Doing so would only prove the point of my detractors that I have belonged more to them than to the Jewish community.

I have had many difficult situations in my life when I had to hold on to my sanity for dear life. My life was the life of a Jewish woman from the provinces, yearning to break the narrow confines of her community for broader horizons, yet who at the same time is unwilling or unable to sever her roots from her fathers' orthodox religion and small town community. As a consequence I frequently ended up out in the cold, in a no-man's land: estranged from my community of origin, an outsider in it, yet even more of a stranger among the small circle of the Hungarian intelligentsia of my home town, no matter how close my ties of friendship and love have been to a few among them. They called me half jokingly the Madame Recamier of our town at the times when the town literati enjoyed the hospitality of my parlor.

Jozsi R., my friend and former lover, the director of the power plant of our town, has sent to several encouraging secret missives to me in the Ghetto. He even offered to use his ties to the municipal bureaucracy on my behalf to obtain travel papers for me, if I wanted to follow my brother H.'s advice and escape to the capital; even though he personally vehemently refused to lend credence to those rumors of "lying enemy propaganda", circulating in our town. The Germans would never stoop to such acts of barbarism, as crude murder of women and children, as the BBC of London charges. All the Germans want is a homogeneous Christian civilization in their new order in Europe. Did not he, Jozsi, also have Germans among his ancestors?

Actually, Jozsi, with his gestures of generosity, the promises of help, yet the jealous guarding of his own precious self-interest, reminds me of that biggest error of my life, my first love, Karcsi.

I have often wondered what fascinated me about K. It was not his dashing appearance that ultimately captivated me, though I must admit, it certainly flattered my feminine vanity.

It was not even his perfect command of German and French which made him the man of the world that fascinated me in him, but rather the totally different vision of the good life he represented. K.'s outlook on life was such a contrast to the small hearted, small town vision of happiness which the other young men of my hometown pursued. All they aspired to was bourgeois security in the form of a small business of their own. While K. shared with me an orthodox family origin, which helped the understanding between us and even made him almost presentable to my own family, he was quite a mutant in the circle we both came from. He was equally at home in the Hungarian and the French literary circles, where his publishing business took him.

He was the first who encouraged my fledgling attempts to write, to give literary expression of my love of Jewish life of tradition, which most of the other Hungarian Jewish writers avoided like the plague. In their eagerness not to appear any different than the rest of the Hungarian pack, they rejected the world of Jewish experience no less than their Christian colleagues did. After not too long my poems published in the few Jewish journals started attracting some attention and even some critical acclaim.

Our extended trip with Karcsi to Paris in the early twenties served as our honeymoon. Actually, we had not yet gotten around to the formal Jewish wedding ceremony with our families. But weren't we already partners in everything but form?

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ceremony with our families. But weren't we already partners in everything but form?

We had saved the wedding ceremony to the time when K.'s new publishing venture would be safely on its way: -a new literary magazine with the participation of the French oriented Hungarian writers. In this venture he allowed me to invest the nest egg I had saved up over the years. There in Paris he introduced me to his literary friends in their cafes, admirers and epigones of Baudelaire, the poet of the eccentric, and to the Gide circle. He was proud that my French had almost no Hungarian accent, and that I had also written and published some poetry in French.

Troubles started in our relations when I had joyfully revealed to him that I was expecting his child. The logical solution would have been to formalize our relationship finally, as we originally had planned to do anyway. I was already 26, dangerously approaching old maidenhood even outside the confines of my hometown community. But at this point K. got cold feet. He felt this the worst time in his life to accept the burdens of fatherhood, before his plan with the new journal materialized. When I finally grudgingly assented to get rid of the baby I sensed with increasing despair that it was the beginning of the end of our relationship, the end of the love of my life. I felt betrayed, and he also showed his cooling towards me. Then came the crash, the loss of his business and with it also my own nest egg.

Finally I ended up back in my hometown with my family, an 'old maid' of 27 minus bridegroom or husband with a tarnished reputation. I was now a problematic match even if I would have agreed to compromise, and finally accept some of my former petit bourgeois suitors from our small town community. This, even though the sinful act of my secret abortion remained a well guarded secret within the confines of my own family.

I thank God's grace that it was during this great crisis in my life that more of my poems were published in the newly founded Hungarian Zionist periodical, "New Hopes", under my pseudonym. I had kept my poet's existence a secret in my own

We had saved the wedding ceremony to the time when K's new publishing venture would be solely on its way - a new literary magazine with the participation of the French oriented Hungarian writers. In this venture he allowed me to invest the nest egg I had saved up over the years. There in Paris he introduced me to his literary friends in their cafes, admirers and epigones of Mandelstam, the poet of the economic and the Gypsies circle. He was proud that my French had almost no Hungarian accent, and that I had also written and published some poetry in French. Troubles started in our relations when I had joyfully revealed to him that I was expecting his child. The logical solution would have been to terminate our relationship finally, as we originally had planned to do anyway. I was already 36, dangerously approaching old marriedhood even outside the confines of my hometown community. But at this point K. got cold feet. He felt this the worst time in his life to accept the burden of fatherhood, before his plan with the new journal unfolded. When I finally frustratingly assented to get rid of the baby I sensed with increasing despair that it was the beginning of the end of our relationship, the end of the love of my life. I felt betray ed, and he also showed his cooling towards me. I then came the crash, the loss of his business and with it also my own nest egg. Finally I ended up back in my hometown with my family, an old maid of 37, minus fatherhood or husband, with a tarnished reputation. I was now a Protestant woman even if I could have agreed to compromises, and finally accept some of my former petty bourgeois snobishness from our small town community. This even though the selfish act of my secret abortion remained a well guarded secret within the confines of my own family.

I thank God's grace that it was during this great crisis in my life that some of my poems were published in the newly founded Hungarian National periodical, "New Horizons", under my pseudonym. I had kept my poet's existence a secret in my own

community. Who knows, perhaps I was afraid to make it even more difficult for the matchmakers. But this secret success up my sleeve helped me from sinking into despair, and restored some of my confidence, at least in my own eyes. It was also during the same time that my friendship by correspondence had started with K. J., the Jewish Hungarian writer, my literary idol and ideal. He had been the sole exception in the Hungarian literature, which had many outstanding Jewish writers, but none other than himself singing the beauty of traditional rural Jewish existence. His encouragement and paternal friendship at this difficult time of my life actually saved my life. My small-minded detractors, who had falsely spread the rumor of a carnal love affair between us, would have been greatly surprised to learn that I had met with K. J. personally only twice, each time innocently in a cafe in the spa R. I will not deny today, with my present more mature insight about the nature of love, that Eros must have played a role in our friendship by correspondence, even if it was not acted out in bed. It certainly did on my side of the line. I actually felt it in the sensation of being in heaven on the days I wrote him my weekly letters. To our disappointment, we both found that during the brief personal meetings the bright flame of the erotic tension in our relationship had actually dimmed. And I don't think it was only the realization of the big age difference that brought it about. Our relationship had been obviously destined to remain on the sublime, spiritual level, very much like father-daughter and mentor-disciple relations ought to stay.

Which reminds me of our biological father. I can only ask God the merciful, to forgive us at the end of our lives for what we sinned against him. He was a simple pious Jew, not ignorant in the sacred literature, but also not quite a big scholar, a Talmid-Khakham like the rabbis from the family of his wife, my mother. What my father lacked in Talmudic scholarship he made up in his Hassidic piety. This was an area, the area of dogmatic piety, where he could presume to compete with his wife,

our mother. That was therefore also the issue that lent an explosive outlet some times to his hidden resentment against his so superior wife, and later also against his oldest daughter, who was presuming to emulate the superiority of her mother. On such occasions our mother, blessed be her memory, wisely kept silent, and thus still maintained her moral superiority.

I still don't quite understand, however, how our mother, the refined, educated daughter of a rabbinical family, ended up with him. This secret will surely remain with their matchmaker, whoever he or she had been. Our mother, Hanna, was a remarkable person, pious, yet well read not only in the sacred Jewish literature, but also in the classical German and Hungarian writers. She was famous in the extended family for her letter writing talents in Yiddish, German and Hungarian. I have managed to preserve some of her epistles written to some of her sisters in Bohemia. Their marriage was relatively harmonious primarily in the passive sense, that is there were no loud rows between them. My mother, Hanna, blessed be her memory, must have considered marriage among the many sacred duties and burdens of the pious Jewish woman. But how could she help it if the comparison between her and her poor simpler husband reflected so poorly on him. That is probably the reason that a degree of contempt toward our poor father crept into my relationship to him, and through my own example, that of the oldest, into the attitudes of my younger siblings also. I pondered but rejected the possibility that this sinfull contempt toward our father, blessed be his memory, we may have gleaned from our mother. She, who had avoided the vice of pride as sinful would not have knowingly allowed herself to into the sin of contempt toward her husband.

I must confess, I rarely felt love toward my father, seldom respect and frequently only pity. Yet I would not be surprised, on the other hand, if the filial love and trust

of an admiring daughter would have been part of the Eros in my relationship to K .J., my literary ideal.

After the big disappointment with K. , my first love, I had buried myself in the little millinery shop I had acquired earlier, and in the small town existence, as one buries oneself in a monastery. In due time my shop flourished and became the best establishment of its kind in the county. Whoever in the county aristocracy did not obtain the latest fashion from Mathild did not count as being 'in'.

Socially I never found my way to the young Jewish men of my community; they were too narrow and business oriented in my eyes. More than any other aspect of matrimony I have missed being a mother. I ended up lavishing much of my unused maternal love on the children of my brothers.

I had a favorite among them, the oldest boy of my oldest brother, who had spent many months-long vacations in my house from the time he was a two years old toddler. My relationship with the boy reached the point that I started feeling guilty toward my sister-in-law in the distant capital, because the boy, my nephew, seemed closer to me than to his own mother, who was also my friend. And, of course, it is a grave sin to estrange a son from his mother - no matter that at the same time I had also relieved his mother, my friend, burdened by her two other small children.

But the boy seemed intelligent and receptive and at times I felt that he had more in him from me than from his biological mother. Of course, I fully know that such things don't have to be genetic. The signs of congeniality could very well have been the fruits of the very seeds that my maternal love had planted in him.

During the many months of his stay in my house, he became precociously familiar with a great part of my well-endowed library. He was sometimes following my guidance, at others rushing ahead of it, as both sons and students would.

My house somehow became the meeting place of a small coterie of young Hungarian intellectuals in our town with literary interests . Their visit in my house, of a Jewish young woman with some questionable elements in her reputation, may have represented for them the lure of an act of daring and defiance of the conventional. I don't have to say that the topic was strictly literary and the atmosphere quite chaste, contrary to the prurient imagination of some wags in town. Thus the visit to my salon became the 'in' thing in certain circles in this county seat. J. A., later the leading poetic genius of the country, had also found his way to my house during his student years in the neighboring university town. My social success in this circle did not necessarily open the doors of the leading gentile homes for me. For them I was single and Jewish no matter what my literary attainments. Since I had continued to observe faithfully the dietary laws of Jewish orthodoxy all my life, social visits with gentile families remained awkward. Very few of them had the broad mindedness to respect the culturally different. Within my orthodox Jewish community too, my relationship remained respectfully correct but in my social standing marginal. My observance of the laws of Orthodox Judaism has been common knowledge in the community, since little remains secret about the residents of a small town. I attended the orthodox synagogue during the high holidays and bought my meat from the orthodox butcher. These facts earned me a degree of tolerance, if not acceptance, in the community. Actually, nevertheless, there has been no place in their world for an independent minded single woman. Indeed, I have been vaguely aware of some contradictions in my existence, but isn't this a common state of affairs among us humans? I know, that in matters of my love life I deviated gravely from the orthodox Jewish, and even general bourgeois norms, but I don't feel guilt about it, except for my abortion. But that is rather a deep sorrow and regret for not having been able to fulfill my destiny as a mother. In matter of ethics, on the other hand, rather than

morality, I have inherited the values of my dear departed mother, including her belief in sin.

The fact that even in the present crowded ghetto conditions they allowed me the so vital privacy of my small room, which allows me the luxury of writing, attests to a certain grudging respect they accord to my person. Yet the anomalous situation still persists that my intimate friends come mostly from the gentile community, most of whom look now on with gloating, or at best with indifference, as we are being transported to our destruction. Could it be that my orthodox brethren were right after all when they upheld our splendid isolation? At least they are being spared the present bitterness of my disappointment.

It is now finally clear to me where I belong. Nobody can dispute it anymore. Perhaps my strange calm and peace of mind under the present circumstances results from this clarity.

*

I have to conclude. I already see through my window the plumed hats of the Hungarian gendarmes and hear the cries of women and children. I heard that last night they beat to death a bearded shochet, ^{the} ritual orthodox slaughterer of the community, while people were watching with horror as the victim in vain begged for his life. Just in jest. These gendarmes are living up again to their reputation for wanton cruelty as they drag us out to our last journey.

My God, don't allow them to rob us of our human face! Merciful Father, God of Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, grant me the grace to die before it happens!

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The fact that even in the present crowded ghetto conditions they allowed me the so vital privacy of my small room, which allows me the luxury of writing, adds to a certain fondling respect they accord to my person. Yet the anomalous situation still persists that my intimate friends come mostly from the gentile community, most of whom look now on with sympathy, or at least with indifference, as we are being transported to our destination. I would it be that my mother's brethren were right after all when they upheld our splendid isolation? At least they were doing spared the personal bitterness of my disappointment.

It is now finally clear to me where I belong. Nobody can dispute it anymore. Perhaps my strange calm and peace of mind under the present circumstances results from this clarity.

I have to conclude, I already see through my window the plumed hats of the Hungarian gentlemen and hear the cries of women and children. I heard that last night they had to shoot a hundred shot. I am not alone, I am not alone of the community, while people were waiting with horror as the victim in vain begged for his life. Just in fact. These gentlemen are living up again to their reputation for wanton cruelty as they drag us out to our last journey.

My God, don't allow them to rob us of our human face! Absolved Father, God of Sarah, Rachel and Leah, grant me the grace to die before I happen!